



VICCIY REPORT: PROVINCIAL YOUTH WELLNESS SUMMIT 2023

Report Provided by:

Lindsey Boechler, Research Manager
Centre for Health Research, Innovation and Scholarship
Saskatchewan Polytechnic
lindsey.boechler@saskpolytech.ca



Overview



Saskatchewan Polytechnic hosted an inaugural Provincial Youth Wellness Summit, held at Dakota Dunes Resort on Chief Whitecap First Nation, from October 4th to 6th, 2023. A total of 68 grade 9 to 12 students from across 15 rural and remote SK communities attended.



His Honour the Honourable Russ Mirasty, Lieutenant Governor of Saskatchewan, and Her Honour Donna Mirasty joined Elders and students participating in the summit for breakfast before His Honour addressed the group and shared about his inspirational life journey.

A Gathering of Many Nations

Attending communities included:

La Loche, James Smith Cree Nation, Buffalo Narrows, Red Earth Cree Nation, Punnichy, Shoal Lake Cree Nation, Cumberland House Cree Nation, Waterhen Lake First Nation, Clearwater River Dene Nation, Buffalo River Dene Nation, Birch Narrows Dene Nation, English River First Nation, Makwa Sahgaiehcan First Nation, Ministikwan Lake Cree Nation and Canoe Lake First Nation.





Background

The Provincial Youth Wellness Summit was part of an over-arching research project titled, Virtual Interventions and Community Connections for Indigenous Youth (VICCIY). The VICCIY initiative focuses on supporting the mental health and well-being of Indigenous youth living in rural and remote communities across Saskatchewan through collaboration with and empowerment of the partnering communities. Although Indigenous Canadians represent only a fraction of the national population, the suicide rate of Indigenous youth is five to seven times higher than non-Indigenous youth (Suicide Prevention, 2023). These statistics indicate that the current approach to mental health care is not adequate. Our research team is exploring the potential of leveraging virtual reality (VR) technology to help address disparities in mental health care and better support the well-being of Indigenous youth living in rural and remote SK communities.

Background Continued

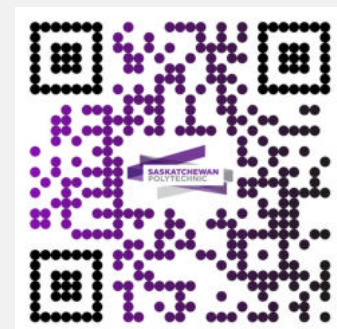


VICCIY initiative employs a community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) approach, ensuring project objectives are designed by and for Indigenous youths, resulting in increased acceptance from and connectedness with communities. Through our partnerships, we have identified the need for a multi-pronged approach that interweaves face-to-face and virtual wellness supports.

Our research objectives are rooted within four primary project pillars — a strengthened sense of safety, identity, belonging, and community. This initiative focuses on physical, emotional, psychological, and cultural **safety** through Indigenous-designed, results-based wellness workshops, resiliency training, role-model interactions, and support services. Virtual connections paired with in-person wellness engagements will support youths in discovering and reconnecting with their Indigenous **identity**. Moreover, the participating youths' sense of **belonging** will flourish with the opportunity to immerse themselves in a safe, collective environment that encourages relationship-building and self-determination, ultimately resulting in a strengthened sense of **community**.



Scan or click QR codes for short video overviews of the VICCIY Initiative.





Summit Overview

Hosting a Provincial Youth Wellness Summit was conceived by Saskatchewan Polytechnic researchers alongside community partners. Our work leading up to the summit identified the need to interweave face-to-face engagements with virtual resources. The summit was designed in a manner intended to connect youth and foster friendships; promote culture; host Indigenous role models; introduce varying wellness strategies; familiarize youth with VR technology; and virtually capture the wellness strategies introduced at the summit so youth can continue to access resources following the event from their home communities.

Youth were given an activity selection form as part of their summit registration packages, providing them the opportunity to rate their degree of interest in various breakout sessions being offered. This allowed each youth's summit experience to be personally tailored to their interests and needs. Students had the opportunity to attend three of the 10 breakout sessions being offered. In addition, all students took part in a fourth session that introduced VR technology as it provided students with the capacity needed to utilize the VR headsets after returning home. Specialized recordings from the presenters are currently being captured to be uploaded to VR headsets and gifted to partnering communities

Breakout Sessions

The youth had 10 breakout session options to choose from—some cultural, some creative, some more serious—with sessions led by Indigenous role models and Elders, Legacy One, CrossFit 161, SK Indigenous Yoga Association (SIYA), Saskatchewan Prevention Institute, Saskatchewan Advocate for Children and Youth, and a specialist in play therapy.



Breakout Session Descriptions

Healing Circle led by Elder Lorna - This Healing Circle was for youth dealing with any form of grief, loss or trauma and wanting to participate in healing practice, held by Elder Lorna.

Flip the Script Presentation by Legacy One - Youth learned how to conquer the struggles they are facing by building resiliency and character by learning practical tools. Legacy One is a group of artists that share their life stories through spoken word.

Discover Emotional Regulation through Creative Play - Youth learned ways to express themselves through art and began the journey of self-discovery and emotional regulation. Youth gained insight on the therapeutic benefits of creative expression through painting. There is power in managing one's own emotions with an innovative approach that combines the joys of painting with the insights of cognitive behavioral therapy.

Mini Tipi set up and Guided Nature Visualization - Participants learned how to set-up a small Dakota style tipi and the historical teachings that go along with this. This session was combined with an explorative nature-themed visualization. This visualization guided the youth through a series of progressive relaxation exercises to release stress and increase feelings of tranquility by engaging the youth with the power of their creative mind.

Changing the Story through Resilience: Youth Action for Prevention with Dale Apesis - Students engaged in meaningful activities towards alcohol use, learned about how alcohol has impacted their lives and communities, and explored innovative ideas and solutions to reduce alcohol related harms including sexual reproductive health.

Breakout Session Descriptions Continued

Express Yourself through Writing with Beatrice Wallace - Youth were introduced to using journaling to boost their mood, recognize triggers, as well as learning ways to better control these triggers.

Speak For Yourself: A self-advocacy workshop - Youth were taught about how to be a good self-advocate, which includes knowing who they are as a person, learning about their rights, and learning how to be an effective communicator.

Introduction to Healing Yoga - Youth were guided through an introduction to yoga and mindfulness for healing led by Dawn from the Saskatchewan Indigenous Yoga Association (SIYA). Participants were provided with a yoga mat to take home.

Magic of Aurora: Artistry with Carol Rose GoldenEagle - Within Indigenous culture, there are many stories about the magic of Aurora Borealis, from connecting with ancestors, to healing, to discovering joy & wonderment. Youth learned how to bring this into their everyday lives by taking part in a creative workshop and learning to create their own personal Aurora.

Body Movin' with CrossFit 161 - Youth were led through a fun introduction to exercise that youth can do wherever they are. This session offered some movement games and ways to manage stress in a healthy way.

The summit also included a variety of large group activities including ice breakers, performances by a traditional hoop dancer and the Creeland Dancers, the Legacy One Assembly Show, a leadership presentation and "Who Am I" T-Shirt exercise led by USask Professor, Dr. June Anonson and presentations from role models, His Honour Russ Mirasty, Lieutenant Governor of SK and Mr. Jim Lemaigre, Member of Legislative Assembly of SK.

Data Collection and Findings

Youth registered to attend the summit were invited to complete a preliminary survey that included the Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale-Youth Version (DASS-Y) prior to attending the Provincial Youth Wellness Summit. The DASS-Y is a self-report scale designed to measure dimensions of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms, as defined within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), being experienced by respondents at the time of their response. Data collection will be repeated three months (February 2024) and six months (May 2024) following the summit. Statistical analysis will focus on changes in scores on the DASS-Y over time as well as on a comparison of outcomes between youth who utilize VR resources often and those who do not. Additionally, attending youth responded to surveys and participated in closing sharing circles during the summit as part of data collection.

Initial findings from the pre-summit survey indicated that 40% of respondents were experiencing moderate to extremely severe effects of stress at the time of responding to the survey; 38% were experiencing moderate to extremely severe effects anxiety; and 20% were experiencing moderate to extreme effects of depression. Additionally, survey responses indicated that 38% of respondents were experiencing moderate to extremely severe effects in more than one category. Although the DASS-Y scale is not a clinical instrument and cannot diagnose depression, anxiety, or stress, it is recommended that any indication of having a significant effect on one's life within any of the three categories highlights a potential need for additional wellness supports.

Impact

Closing the summit with sharing circles as a means of data collection provided youth an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and made space for forward-thinking surrounding how they will continue to engage in the wellness practices that were introduced once they return home. Youth also discussed what resources they felt they needed to support their continued growth. Many attendees expressed feeling inspired, excitement over making new friends and having gained confidence.

Reflections from youth about their experience, shared during our closing sharing circles, included:

“I enjoyed all the activities and I didn't think I was going to participate in much but surprisingly, I participated in

everything”
“I think I should start opening up more, slowly trying to trust people again”

“Feelings I was feeling during these activities are probably shy at first, but then I started opening up because there were people that were actually talkative in the group... I started opening up too and it made me feel better about myself”

“Healing circles were nice ... I feel like the community, not just me, the community could use that as many individuals are hurt and hurting”

“My favorite activity was probably that [Youth Action for Prevention] one, where you talk about alcoholism and the impacts. That's probably my favorite one and I'll definitely be taking that home and using it in real life”

Impact Continued

The importance of continued communication and connection was mentioned in every closing circle when discussing what would support youth in continuing their wellness journeys.

A mental health therapist who also served as a summit chaperone shared:

“From what I heard on the ride back to the community, the students really enjoyed themselves..It’s an amazing thing Lindsey and her team have been doing. In [our community] there are very limited resources for mental health. [Lindsey] has been in these communities to see for herself the types of struggles our students are experiencing. It’s important for researchers to come and see for themselves so they can understand what northern and rural First Nations kids face.”

Summit organizers received overwhelmingly positive feedback following the summit; however, the true impacts will be better defined and measurable following the subsequent data collection scheduled to take place in February and May, 2024.



Next Steps

Many youths expressed interest surrounding the potential use of VR in terms of supporting their wellbeing while remaining within their communities. Our team continued to work with the session facilitators following the summit to develop a library of VR content that will be uploaded onto VR headsets. These VR headsets will be gifted to each community that attended the summit in February 2024, allowing participating youth to revisit and share learnings from the summit with their peers. This component of our study aims to continue growing the technological capacity within partnering communities and is a first step in incorporating the use of VR technology to support wellness practices of youths. The virtual library includes short segments of facilitators sharing their advice, motivational insight, or additional wellness practices for youth. This content has been personalized based on the presenters' experiences and connections with the youth during the breakout sessions. The VR library also includes a montage of student led recordings developed by attending youths as part of the Introduction to VR Technology session that was offered.



Next Steps Continued

Hosting annual summits will establish and foster strong connections among youth and empower partnering communities through capacity building and engagement. Over time, we will hope that provincial summits grow to include additional communities, expanding the VICCIY initiative's reach.

Since the summit, the VICCIY research team has applied for additional research funding to trial a VR platform to gather inceptive evidence pertaining to the benefits of leveraging the metaverse to address existing gaps in mental health care and enhance existing supports available to Indigenous youth. If funded, this trial will allow our team to host virtual asynchronous and synchronous wellness workshops and interventions; evaluate the efficacy of leveraging VR to provide mental health care and wellness resources; and assess the need to develop a secure, dedicated platform from new compared to the feasibility of providing ongoing services through an existing platform with highly advanced technological features.

Summit Expense Summary

| Expenses | Total |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| Accommodations*, Venue, AV & Meals | 74,110 |
| Presenter Fees | 11,330 |
| VR Expertise and Development | 14,320 |
| VR Headsets | 13,770 |
| Counselling Services | 3,130 |
| Elder Honorariums and cultural gifts | 4,560 |
| Misc Expenses, Supplies, & Rentals | 8,830 |
| Volunteer Travel Expenses | 1,600 |
| | |
| Total Cost | 131,650 |

** MLTC paid costs of accommodations for attending youth that are part of their Youth and Development Program*



Thank You for Your Support



Mahsi cho; Kinanâskomitin; Pidamaya; Miigwech; Marsee; Thank You to our supporters and funders for making the Provincial Youth Wellness Summit possible.